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Eamon Maher

Memorialising the War: Loss and the Birth of a literary vocation in Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Jean Sullivan (1913-1980)

Albert Camus and Jean Sullivan followed very different paths in life. Camus, the son of a *pied-noir* farm manager in Algeria, arrived in France at the beginning of World War II and by the end of that conflict was already the hugely respected and successful author of such classics as *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. He had also been active in the Resistance and was seen, along with Jean-Paul Sartre, as a leading light of the existentialist movement, even if he had difficulties with that particular etiquette. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1958, before dying tragically in a car crash along with a member of the Gallimard publishing house, under whose imprint most of his books appeared, in 1960. Sullivan, whose real name was Joseph Lemarchand, was the first and only child born to tenant farmers in Montauban-de-Bretagne. Mainly as a result of the strong faith and piety of his mother, Sullivan entered the junior seminary at an early age and was ordained priest in 1938. He went on to teach in the diocesan Catholic school in Rennes, where he also was responsible for forming a cinéclub and a cultural centre. He did not publish his first fiction until 1958, at which point he was 45 years of age. Between then and his death, however, he published 10 novels, two collections of short stories, several essays, a memoir and a spiritual diary. Most of his works, like those of Camus, were published by Gallimard, which shows that he was perceived to be a writer of quality.

So one can instantly detect the sharp contrast between a Nobel Laureate and a writer who has to date not received the recognition he deserves, between someone who has a huge international following and concomitant book sales and an as yet relatively unknown priest-writer. Why therefore would one choose to offer a comparative reading of the two writers, as I am proposing in this article? The key can be found in their year of birth, 1913, and the traumatic impact the start of the Great War would have on their families with the death of the fathers at an early stage during the hostilities – Lucien Camus died at the Battle of the Marne and Lemarchand in the Argonne. Neither child got to know his father and, as they grew to adulthood, both slowly came to appreciate the extent to which their characters and literary vocations were strongly linked to the loss they suffered at such a young age. Sullivan often described himself as “*un fils de tué*”, the son of a dead man, and this led him to identify with the victims of society, the downtrodden and the marginalised, the rebels and misfits. He stated in an interview with Marcel Brisebois in 1975:

J'ai pris conscience à un âge avancé que, en effet, ce que je croyais, ce que je croyais qui m'était propre, ce qui faisait ma différence, j'avais la naïveté de croire que c'était quelque chose de conquis, que c'était un regard sur le monde qui me faisait rejeter la société, choisir une certaine voix de solitude, de hauteur et progressivement je me suis aperçu que cela tenait au fait que,

*n'ayant pas de père, n'ayant pas connu mon père, mon père ayant été tué, je me solidarais avec la mort de mon père.*¹

[I realised at a young age, in fact, that what I believed, what I thought was unique to me, what made me different in some way, I was naïve enough to believe that it was something of a personal conquest, that it was a way of looking at the world that made me reject the company of others in order to choose a solitary and aloof voice. Little by little, however, I noticed that this special vocation went back to the fact of not having a father, of never having known my father; because my father had been killed, I felt solidarity with the death of my father.]

It gradually dawned on Sullivan that he was in some way identifying with the death of his father and that his close identification with this event marked his literary evolution. Camus may well have experienced something similar and certainly, if we are to accept the strong autobiographical overtones of the posthumously published novel, *The First Man*, the experience of travelling to St Brieuc to visit his father's grave in the military cemetery in that town left a considerable imprint on him. Jacques Cormery, a barely fictionalised version of Camus, wonders what prompted this journey back in time:

He thought this visit made no sense, first of all for himself, who had never known his father, who knew next to nothing of what he had been, and who loathed conventional gestures and behaviour; and then for his mother, who never spoke of the dead man and could picture nothing of what he was going to see.²

Cormery's mother, an uneducated woman with a hearing problem, was not given to flamboyant speech. Like Camus' own mother, it was her silent strength, her ability to endure the vicissitudes of life in an uncomplaining manner – after her husband's death, she and her two sons went to live with her mother in a poor area of Algiers where she was forced to work as a charwoman – that he came to admire. She did not like talking about her dead husband, which may account for her son's surprisingly emotional reaction at this man's grave. Looking on the dates on the tombstone, 1885-1914, he calculates that his father died aged twenty-nine, whereas he is now forty years old himself:

And the wave of tenderness and pity that at once filled his heart was not the stirring of the soul that leads the son to the memory of the vanished father, but the overwhelming compassion that a grown man feels for an unjustly murdered child – something here was not in the natural order and, in truth, there was no order but only madness and chaos when the son was older than the father (20).

Lucien Camus would not have been particularly young relative to the other millions of men who died in the Great War, mostly in a senseless butchery that beggars belief. Forced over

¹ 'Marcel Brisebois-Jean Sullivan' in *Rencontres avec Jean Sullivan* (2) (Paris : Association des Amis de Jean Sullivan, 1986), pp.57-68), pp.58-59.

² Albert Camus, *The First Man*, David Hapgood trans. (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p.19. All future references will be to this edition with page numbers in brackets.

the top of the trenches to face almost certain death, running through mud, a hail of bullets, walking over the bodies of their dead or wounded comrades, unaware of what cause could justify such mindless carnage, this was the experience that millions of men, including the writers' fathers, encountered in 1914 and beyond. They had done nothing to incite the conflict and yet had felt obliged, possibly out of a gnawing sense of patriotism, to join their respective regiments, leaving behind their wives and children. Sullivan's mother first heard news of the outbreak of war during a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Anne of Auray. The train stopped at the town of La Brohinière and Sullivan's uncle, a priest, got on the train excitedly clutching a newspaper and declaring joyfully: "There's going to be a war!" He was as happy as a young schoolboy and exclaimed somewhat naively, and tactlessly, when one considers what Madame Lemarchand would make of the prospect of her husband leaving for the front: "We'll go to Berlin." Looking back on the episode years later, Sullivan observed:

I can conjure up in my mind's eye my childlike uncle, full of the lion-hearted courage of youth. He was a prisoner of the dark war machine without even realising it. War is all about action, camaraderie. They were very lucky at that time to be able to marry Christianity and duty with the desire to lead and to be a hero.³

Anyone even remotely aware of the moral climate in France around 1914 will know that it was characterised by a renewed sense of Catholic piety, best encapsulated in the writings of Charles Péguy, who put forward the idea of the Gospel going hand in hand with the Fatherland. For Péguy, that the Catholic Church and France were indissociable from one another. Sullivan's uncle would go on to become a war hero. He signed up for a commando unit, escaped once or twice from the Germans and was showered with medals and citations. Sullivan was not a fan of this glorification of war and yet could see why his uncle might feel the way he did. In the end, the older man lived long enough to experience another, less glorious, war, albeit one in which he was too elderly to take an active part. Sullivan observes: "He died a sad man in his bed, saying to himself that all the values he had espoused in his life had disappeared. It wasn't his fault that he had been taught to revere those values" (21).

Sullivan's memoir, *Devance tout adieu*⁴, gives us the kind of personal details that are not as readily accessible in Camus' *Le premier Homme*, which attempts to maintain a thin veil of fiction, a veil that would undoubtedly have been enhanced had its author not died when it was still at the manuscript stage. While the memoir's central preoccupation is to depict the strong bond between mother and son and the rawness and helplessness he feels at her deathbed, there are nonetheless plenty of references to the way in which the Great War impacted on this small Breton family in Sullivan's account. For example, we discover that the father went to the train station on his own with the army-issued pack slung over his shoulder. There was no talk about going to Berlin, unlike the posturing of Sullivan's uncle; it was just a quiet, dignified departure by a man who was fulfilling his duty to the Fatherland. We read:

³ Jean Sullivan, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, trans. Eamon Maher (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), pp. 20-21. All future references will be to this edition, with page numbers in brackets.

⁴ French title for *Anticipate Every Goodbye*.

I suspect that as he was heading to the station across the paths he was saying goodbye to the land with the soles of his shoes. I also have an image of him passing his hand lightly over the trunk of a tree with, perhaps, the same look of not knowing what would become of him as I saw in the eyes of a dying animal (24).

A man of the earth whose life was thrown into disarray by events outside his control, a man who probably sensed he would never again see the land he had tilled with such diligence, or his young wife and child, there is in this description a poignancy and a universality that are very striking. In other countries, like Ireland for example, millions of men were similarly leaving homes to which they would never return. The news reels of the time rarely dwelled on the uglier aspects of the war and Sullivan could never watch them without feeling anger and shame at how the soldiers were misrepresented:

It's almost as if the soldiers could see themselves, as if I were among them, these men who were rudely torn from their humble existence, these puppets tossed about in the communication trenches, blessed by their priests, soldiers bolstered up by alcohol as much as by the monstrous propaganda campaigns which confused everything: money, fatherland, religion, God. It is always the living who recall the wars. At times you'd like to have the perspective of those who died (24-25).

There is a Célinian tone to these lines, which is not strange when one considers that Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was a book that Sullivan brought with him everywhere he went. What galls Sullivan, as it did Céline, is the way in which the propaganda machine in countries like France presented as wonderful something that those fighting on the front knew to be very different indeed. It was not glorious to be bombarded by shells, to see your comrades ripped to pieces, to hear them crying out for their mothers as they lost a limb, or see their insides protruding through the military uniforms. It was not glorious to be eaten alive by ticks, to see huge rats feeding on dead or dying soldiers, to know the horror of death and the smell of putrefaction all around you. What was glorious was the loyalty of the men who tried to put as positive a gloss as possible on what they were enduring in the letters they wrote home:

The letters all said that my father, the soldier, was ready to die, as if he wanted his wife to gradually get used to the idea of his being dead and that she would at least have the slight comfort of knowing that he had died in peace (25-26).

Standing motionless among all those tombs in St Briec, Jacques Cormery has the feeling that the "course of time itself was shattering around him" and that "the years no longer kept to their places in the great river that flows to its end" (*First Man*, 20). He suddenly realises that "this soil was strewn with children who had been the fathers of greying men who thought they were living in this present time" (21). Looking back on his life, Cormery remembers what he had been like at 29, the age his father met his maker, and admits that he led a life that was "foolish, cowardly, wilful" and that he had always been straining "towards that goal which he knew nothing about, and actually that life had all gone by without his having tried to imagine who this man was who had given him life and then immediately had gone off to

die in a strange land on the other side of the seas.” (21) He had been told virtually nothing about this stranger by his mother or her family. He had been unaware of the type of man his father was as he struggled through life in Algeria without a paternal presence. Had his father not been a “*pied-noir*”, had he not had French blood running through his veins, Camus could never have aspired to become a writer and an intellectual. Access to the French educational system in Algeria was exclusively the preserve of the colonial class and their descendants. Without this lineage, it is equally possible that Lucien Camus would not have gone to war in the first instance, having some years previously been exposed to inhuman atrocities during the Moroccan campaign. On one occasion, he and a comrade went to relieve a sentinel only to find him with his throat slit and his sexual organ placed in his mouth. This led Lucien to conclude that their enemies were not even men, as no human being could commit such a crime. In his future writings, Camus would be vehemently opposed to violence as a means of achieving political goals. He was also opposed to the death penalty, influenced no doubt by how his father, after attending an execution, came home and was violently ill. At the age of forty, Cormery comes to the realisation of just how influenced he had been by his father:

Yet the secret he had eagerly sought to learn through books and people now seemed to him to be intimately linked with this dead man, this younger father, with what he had been and what he had become, and it seemed that he himself had gone far afield in search of what was close to him in time and blood (21).

He was helped by the attentions of a kindly teacher, M. Bernard, who is sometimes referred to as M. Germain, the name of Camus’ own teacher who was the first to see his ability and the odds he was struggling against in his quest to get a good education. M. Bernard gave his students a sense of their worth and felt especially close to those boys whose fathers had served with him in the Zouave regiment. At the end of each term, he would read long excerpts from Dorgelès’s *Les croix de bois*, a classic account of soldiers’ sacrifices during the Great War. For Camus, those readings “opened the door to the exotic, but this time an exotic world stalked by fear and misfortune, although he never made any but a theoretical connection with the father he never knew” (114-115).

Whereas Camus’ mother never remarried, Sullivan’s did and this event was a turning point in his life. Seeing himself replaced in his mother’s affections by a stranger – a man whom she did not love in the same way as her first husband, this second marriage being a marriage of convenience – left the young boy inconsolable. The day of the wedding, he hid in a forest until someone found him and dragged him to the reception where he saw his mother’s face full of sadness and anxiety. The episode left its mark: “But I know that for years I carried a deep scar inside me, a scar that wouldn’t leave me and to which I couldn’t even give a name.” (52) Although he knew that his mother had remarried out of economic necessity – they would have lost the farm if she had continued on her own – Sullivan could only see her action as a betrayal, both of him and of his dead father. And yet he had seen the reaction of his mother at the time of the armistice, when the bells were peeling in the joy of victory, and when she busied herself ostensibly with the milking: “I cannot hear the familiar sound of the milk splashing into the basin. I go closer. Mother is sitting on her stool with the basin on her knee. She has leaned her forehead against the cow; the animal turns around to see what’s

happening. Suddenly mother looks up at me and her eyes are full of tears.” (28) It was not only the soldiers who suffered during the Great War. There was also the pain that their deaths inflicted on their families and friends. There can be no doubting that Camus and Sullivan, children born just before the seismic event that transformed the world forever, came to appreciate over time just how they, as the sons of dead soldiers, as writers with a strong social conscience, as chroniclers of a human existence that can be full of both joy and pain, had a responsibility to bear witness to some of the ideals their fathers had died for and to make of their personal loss a universal hymn to the vanity of war. During his school years, Jacques Cormery defeated his classmate Munoz in a fight that was witnessed by several other students. Afterwards, instead of the elation he expected to feel, he remarks instead in words that sum up the philosophy of Camus and Sullivan: “And then he [Cormery] knew that war was no good, because vanquishing a man is as bitter as being vanquished” (*First Man*, 121).

War and conflict do not offer any real victors, just victims. Camus and Sullivan, “deux fils de tués”, understood the mindlessness of the sacrifice their fathers, a sacrifice that cost them their young lives. The death of these two men did have one positive outcome, however: it sowed the seeds for a literary vocation in their sons and allowed readers to benefit from their wonderful aesthetic qualities and moral insights. It could be said that pain and suffering are necessary in the path to artistic accomplishment. Sullivan captured it well in the following lines from *Petite littérature individuelle*:

*L’écriture, je ne sais pourquoi, est une blessure de l’homme, et la parole une fleur qui pousse dedans, je ne sais comment.*⁵

[Writing, in a way I cannot fully comprehend, is a wound within us all, and words are like a flower growing within, I cannot say how].

⁵ Jean Sullivan, *Petite littérature individuelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p.24.